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HEADLINE: Black Lawmakers Chosen for Key Leadership Roles

BYLINE: John Wagner, Washington Post Staff Writer

BODY:

The new president pro tempore of the Maryland Senate is African American. So is the new Senate health committee chairwoman. And the new House majority whip. And several of the key policy work group chiefs on Gov.-elect Martin O'Malley's transition team. And O'Malley's choice for appointments secretary, who could, in turn, help select scores of other state officials.

Stung by criticism about the lack of diversity at the top of their party's ticket, Maryland's Democratic leaders have moved swiftly since the election to appoint blacks to key leadership posts in the legislature and the incoming administration.

Jeanne Hitchcock, a deputy mayor in Baltimore and former national NAACP staff member, is in line to become appointments secretary, a decision that could be announced as soon as next week. There is mounting speculation that T. Eloise Foster, a budget secretary for then-Gov. Parris N. Glendening (D), could return to serve O'Malley in that capacity. On Wednesday, O'Malley announced that another black woman, Peggy J. Watson, would be a deputy chief of staff.

"Finally, we are being rewarded with leadership," said retiring Sen. Gloria G. Lawlah (D-Prince George's), part of a group of 10 black senators who met with O'Malley and other party leaders during the campaign to discuss their concerns. "I'm elated."

Legislative leaders and aides to O'Malley say race was not a guiding factor in several recent picks, some of which were the result of seniority in the General Assembly or long-standing relationships with O'Malley, Baltimore's mayor.

But they say that, collectively, the choices send an important signal, given the flak Democrats took during the election for fielding a statewide ticket that included only one African American. That candidate, Lt. Gov.-elect Anthony G. Brown, was selected by O'Malley in a state where blacks make up about 28.5 percent of the population.

O'Malley and the party's nominees for U.S. Senate, attorney general and comptroller were all white men -- a situation that prompted Democratic National Committee Chairman Howard Dean to tell reporters last month that "we have got to do a better job in Maryland four years from now about diversity."

"It's very important that this loyal segment of the Democratic Party be recognized in governing," Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr. (D-Calvert) said yesterday. "When you have a voting population that responds in that manner, elected officials need to respond in kind and say, 'Thank you,' and do the right thing."

Several blacks have also been given influential roles on the 45-member committee guiding O'Malley's transition, some of which were announced yesterday.

Among those heading policy work groups are Freeman A. Hrabowski III, president of the University of Maryland Baltimore County, who is advising O'Malley on higher education, and Alvin Thornton, an educator who previously led a state education commission bearing his name, who is advising O'Malley on primary and secondary education.

Foster, Glendening's last budget secretary, is heading a work group on the state budget. An O'Malley spokesman would not confirm Foster's return to a position she left when Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. (R) took office in 2003, but a leading lawmaker said the appointment seems likely, based on conversations with incoming administration officials. "I would be surprised if it's not her," said Sen. Ulysses Currie (D-Prince George's), chairman of the Senate Budget and Taxation Committee.

Hitchcock's selection as appointments secretary was confirmed by sources familiar with the process.

Shortly after the election, Miller announced Sen. Joan Carter Conway (D-Baltimore) as chairwoman of the chamber's health committee. With her pick, two of the four chairmen of standing committees in the Senate will be black.

Miller also announced this week that Sen. Nathaniel J. McFadden (D-Baltimore) would be the new president pro tem, a position formerly held by Sen. Ida G. Ruben (D-Montgomery), a white woman defeated in her primary.

And House leaders announced that Del. Talmadge Branch (D-Baltimore) would replace Brown as House majority whip.

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